

ARE CHILDREN INNOCENT?
Exodus 20:5, Deuteronomy 24:16
By Raymond White

One of the most awkward theological questions is this: are children innocent? It is awkward because we cannot reasonably imagine that children are guilty of anything being helpless as they are at such young ages to make moral choices. Yet anyone who has observed the shenanigans of very young children — (temper tantrums, spiteful anger, violence towards siblings which would be murderous if a child was physically able to kill) — can't help but wonder: regardless of youthful ignorance, can this willful, destructive behavior truly be called innocence?

And the moment we try to honestly tackle that question, another annoying question tackles us: if there is anything like guilt in children, where does it come from? From their parents like a genetic disease, or from somewhere else?

[1] DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

This is not a trivial subject. Christianity is deeply divided over it, to the point that in the sixteenth century, Anabaptists were executed for teaching that child baptism was invalid because children were innocent. In 1551 Germany's House of Parliament passed a decree that removed judges from office who has scruples about executing Anabaptists.

Why such a hissy-fit? Why was everyone so upset and angry? Because to teach that children were innocent, and therefore baptizing them was pointless, perhaps even sinful, that belief necessarily implied that most of Europe's Christians were in fact not baptized because their child baptisms simply weren't valid. That is what riled up so much hatred and resulted in the deaths of so many Christians by the hands of other Christians.

[2] INHERITING THE GOOD AND THE BAD

The Bible is not silent on this subject. It has a few things to say about children and their innocence or guilt, and, considering the violent history of the dispute, we should at least be interested to know what God has to say. Then we can argue about theology all we want, hopefully without killing each other.

Exodus 20:5 ...I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.

Deuteronomy 24:16 The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin.

These two verses seem to contradict each other, or at least there is a tension.

The first says that parents' iniquities have consequences to their children. For a simple example: a pregnant woman uses drugs and causes her baby to be brain damaged. So of course a mother's bad behavior passes consequences to her child.

Unfair? Of course it's unfair. But we're not talking about fairness, we're talking about reality. Rich parents have rich kids, pretty parents have pretty kids, stupid parents have stupid kids, believing parents have believing kids (generally) and rotten parents have rotten kids (generally). That's not God's condemnation of children, it's just the way the world works and that is all that this Exodus verse is saying. If you misbehave, your children will inherit the consequences of your misbehavior, and "I the Lord thy God" allow it, and maybe even cause it to happen. Therefore straighten up and repent, for your children's sake. That's the point of the verse.

The second verse gives us an opposing view. Regardless of nature's nepotism, as far as the law is concerned children are not to be held responsible for their parent's crimes, debts, or mistakes of any kind. That's fair. We can't do much about nature but at least we can try to make our laws just.

This is certainly different than Hammurabi's law (400 years before Moses) which said if you kill my daughter then I can kill your daughter. How Hammurabi thought that was fair is a puzzlement. It was certainly rough on the daughters but oh well. Fortunately, Moses got it right.

And that brings me to the subject of childhood culpability.

Proverbs 20:11 Even a child is known by his doings, whether his work be pure, and whether it be right.

Many Christians — Anabaptists as we saw, and Mormons, and others — firmly believe that children are innocent. The question is, what exactly do we mean by innocent? This verse tells us that children, just like everyone else, are accountable in some sense (i.e., "known by") for their behaviors. Integrity, honesty, virtues of every kind, or lack of, are conspicuous in every child's behavior from early age.

This is more true of children than adults because adults are practiced at sin-hiding hypocrisy while children do not yet have any such skills and therefore hide nothing. They are what they seem to be, and what you see is what you get.

We give children a pass because of their youthful inexperience and inability to make moral choices. Therefore they are unaccountable in any judicial sense. But does unaccountable mean innocent? I'm not sure those two are the same thing. This verse says that you either have integrity or you don't, and that is true even of children.

Isaiah 48:8 ...I knew that thou wouldest deal very treacherously, and was called a transgressor from the womb.

It's hard to misunderstand the intent of this verse. "You are rotten, and you were rotten from the day you were born." Not a lot of room for childhood innocence.

One may argue that God is talking about a nation and not any individual person. But that's an empty argument for what is a nation but a bunch of people? God is accusing them, all of them, of being treacherous from the day of their birth.

Jeremiah 31:29 In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children's teeth are set on edge. :30 But every one shall die

for his own iniquity: every man that eateth the sour grape, his teeth shall be set on edge.

This saying about sour grapes describes an obvious truth, that children often bear the brunt of their father's mistakes. A father eats sour grapes and his child puckers. That this idea is cast as a well known saying evidences that it is not a new idea. Jeremiah didn't author those words, he was quoting a common saying. We have similar idioms today: "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree" and "Like father like son."

Being innocent is not sufficient to protect you from the consequences of someone else's misdeeds. My example of a pregnant mother doing drugs, booze, and tobacco, and passing the consequences of her self-abuse onto her child, makes it impossible to believe that children are not punished for their parent's sins. That is an unfairness of life.

Here's another example: A girl is raised by loving parents and returns their love. Then at some point she learns that during World War II her father had been a German SS officer who embraced his duty of murdering Jews in concentration camps. Now, do his sins accrue down to her? We'd like to think not, but truth is, she can't escape. She has a devil's choice to make. She must love her father anyway which makes her an ally of murderers, or hate her father which is its own sin. Whichever she decides, she is straddled with a life of daily pain perhaps even self-loathing. So, explain to me again: How is this child not punished for her father's transgression? What a person in this situation needs is not reassurance ("It's not your fault") but escape. Fortunately, God provides just such an escape: Jesus Christ who frees us, not only from our own sins, but also from any sins that cling to us from whatever source. God's grace is a clean sweep like chapter 7 bankruptcy, it sweeps over everything. (To see this particular dynamic in action, the child of a Nazi war criminal, watch the Glenn Close movie, "Brush With Fate". It's a great movie, trust me. You will like it, especially if you like the Dutch painter Vermeer.)

Nepotism works both ways — you inherit what your parents leave you, good or bad, or even good *and* bad. That's the luck of the draw.

But that's not the way it should be, and society's job is to mitigate, as far as possible, this essential injustice that children suffer because of their bad parents.

Returning to ***Jeremiah 31:29-30***, God and Jeremiah are looking forward to a time when children are treated fairly despite their parent's bad behavior, as Jeremiah says, if dad wants to eat sour grapes, let *him* pucker, and not his kids.

Our society today tries very hard, with varying degrees of success, to level the playing field for all children. In America anyway, children of poor families don't go hungry. Children of violent parents are removed from danger. Children damaged by mother's addictions are treated and cared for by competent doctors who try to undo the damage as much as possible. All children receive free education. And when children fall through the system, we lament our failure and resolve to do better. I think Jeremiah would be pleased with what we have achieved and by the fact that at least we're trying. We have taken God's advice to heart, and that's good.

[3] A GLARING INJUSTICE

But there is one glaring injustice that we have yet to rectify, and I have no doubt that one day God will throw it in our face. And that is abortion. With fifty million dead

babies and counting, how will we ever escape condemnation for this genocide? How much more sour than that can grapes ever expect to be? Consider this verse —

Lamentations 5:7 Our fathers have sinned, and are not; and we have borne their iniquities.

Our poor little babies are stuck with the consequences of their fathers' sins. Fathers and mothers sin and pass the consequences of those sins onto their babies by murdering them in the womb. That transference of penalty is expressly forbidden —

Ezekiel 18:17 ...he [the innocent child] shall not die for the iniquity of his father, he [the child] shall surely live.

Ezekiel takes us right back to **Deuteronomy 24:16** and the core law that says it is wrong to allow children to be punished for their father's sins. Ezekiel focuses the general commandment to a specific application: do not execute a child for his father's capital crime. Taking this literally, it is impossible to not see this as a condemnation of abortion. The more so since the Torah specifically protects the unborn — killing an unborn child is a capital crime just like killing anyone else.

Exodus 21:22 If men strive, and hurt a woman with child, so that her fruit depart from her, and yet no mischief follow: he shall be surely punished, according as the woman's husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. :23 And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life,

[4] CHILDREN AND HEAVEN

So, what is the bottom line? What happens to children who die without baptism? What if the Anabaptists and Mormons etc. are wrong, and children who die without baptism go to hell or limbo or some other undesirable place? Do children who die get an automatic pass into heaven or not? Just what does the Bible say? Anything? Or nothing? Well, it says this —

Matthew 18:3 And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. 19:14 But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

I do believe that this verse means that children get an automatic pass into heaven. Some might argue that Jesus is not talking about children per se, but people who are *like* children; that is, new Christians. And they'd be right. But I respond to that with this tautological argument. Question: Who is most like "little children"? Answer: "Little children," of course. Well that's obvious. Yes, it's obvious. So obvious that people miss it. What is most like an apple? An apple, of course. Well, duh!

So, if people who are like little children go into the kingdom of heaven, then certainly little children go into the kingdom of heaven or the parable falls apart. As I said: children get an automatic pass into heaven, and the Anabaptists were right.

Romans 5:13 (For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law.)

Here's another argument: Suppose children really do "sin," really do "miss the mark" which is one meaning of the word "sin". This verse is not saying that without law there is no sin, it is saying that without law the sin is not counted. The fact that God is not imputing (not counting) sin proves that there is sin for God to not count. So, law or not law, counted or not counted, there is still sin.

What does this have to do with children? Just this: It is not necessary to suppose that children are sinless in order to suppose that they are counted innocent and so go to heaven. They are not under law because they are too young to understand the law's demands. Therefore they are *counted* innocent. And counted innocent they are therefore unaccountable, even though counted innocent is a different thing than actually innocent, which, by nature, no child is. And you would know that if you've ever met one.

So children who die go to heaven, and that settles our nagging fears for them.

But why? How do they get this free pass? Well, they get their pass from the same person who gives us our pass: Jesus Christ. Only in the case of children, Jesus requires nothing of them. And why is that? Because they are incapable of making moral decisions. Therefore they have no law and therefore they are not accountable. But again, not accountable is a far different thing than sinless.

Who deserves the credit that children are saved? Do children deserve the credit because of their innate goodness? No. Jesus saves children just as he saves all of us, and Jesus deserves the credit.

[5] MORMON ADDENDUM

Mormons in particular take a dim view of any notion of original guilt. Any thought that children might be tainted with sin is completely foreign to Mormon thinking. We think about it at all only when someone rubs our nose in this verse —

Psalms 51:5 Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

And when we're forced to read that verse, we quickly refer to —

Article of Faith 2 We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression.

And we imagine that *Article of Faith 2* somehow mitigates *Psalms 51:5*.

Does it? It does not. It doesn't even speak to the question. The question is not are children punished for someone else's sins or transgressions, the question is do children

have any sins or transgressions *of their own* to begin with? How God deals with such sins or transgressions (whether punishing or forgiving) is a secondary issue.

Quick aside: What is the difference between a sin and a transgression? Sin is a mistake, an error, or missing the mark. Sin has nothing to do with law. If there is no law that says don't smoke, smoking is still dangerous. Absence of warning does not mitigate the lung cancer. Transgression, however, is violating a law. Every pack of cigarettes does have a warning, so that now if you smoke, it is not only dangerous but also stupid. So law makes sin worse, **Romans 7:13**. Transgression then is worse than sin because while sin is doing a bad thing (in ignorance or not doesn't matter because the consequences are the same), transgression is doing that bad thing *and* breaking the law (ignoring the warning) that prohibits that bad thing. So transgression is a double sin. Now back to the subject.

Article of Faith 2 does declare rightly that people are punished only for their own sins and not for someone else's, but that skirts the issue presented by **Psalms 51:5**, which is this: Did we inherit a sin nature that is present in us from birth? I'm not asking will we be punished for it, I am asking is there an innate sin nature in us at all.

If you are a good Mormon, you will reflexively assert, "No. Children do not have sin. They are too pure, too perfect to be sinful."

Well, that's sweet. But have we really taken the time to see just what our own scriptures say? Does our current thinking really agree with scripture or are they at odds?

Let's start with this critical verse.

***Moses 6:54** Hence came the saying abroad among the people, that the Son of God hath atoned for original guilt. Wherein the sins of the parents cannot be answered upon the heads of the children. :55 And the Lord spake unto Adam, saying: Inasmuch as thy children are conceived in sin, even so when they begin to grow up, sin conceiveth in their hearts, and they taste the bitter, that they may know to prize the good.*

We should be careful when we so quickly dismiss **Psalms 51:5** and its notion of "conceived in sin." At least we should acknowledge that the Book of Moses says the very same thing only more strongly. Like it or not, children are indeed "conceived in sin," whatever that means. Are we going to claim that this verse is a mistranslation? Not likely.

So, what does "conceived in sin" mean? Here's what I think it means, and it's just my opinion: As a fish is conceived in an ocean of water, we are conceived in an ocean of sin. It surrounds us, it's in us, it's in our nature and it's inescapable. It's Adam and Eve's legacy to us. Sin conceives in our hearts as we grow, and when we became old enough to be accountable, we have decisions to make about good and evil, but it's there already.

Back to **Article of Faith 2**. What is it asserting? It is asserting that we aren't punished for someone else's sins, that's all it says, and that is the bottom line assurance that we need. But what if we make someone else's sins our own, and we act on those sins? What does God do about that? **Article of Faith 2** is silent.

So, to the real question: Do we inherit a sin nature? That's a fair question. Have you ever seen a temper tantrum in full rage? If you have, you've seen the darker side of a child and might wonder if children are as sinless as we generously think. But they are children, and there is little they can do about it. Therefore God forgives temper tantrums, and so do we. And that's the point. But that is a far different message than children are

innocent because they are so pure and perfect. They're not! That's why we teach them. If children are already perfect, why would we bother to teach them?

Now to get serious about the subject. What do our scriptures (Mormon scriptures) say about original sin? Here is my list. Enjoy.

1 Nephi 10:6 Wherefore, all mankind were in a lost and fallen state, and ever would be save they should rely on this Redeemer.

Does all mankind include children? Of course it does.

2 Nephi 2:8 ...there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah... :9 ...he shall make intercession for all the children of men; and they that believe in him shall be saved. :21 ...for he showed unto all men that they were lost, because of the transgression of their parents.

It certainly seems that “all the children of men” must include children, and “all the children of men” are saved only by the grace of the Holy Messiah. In other words, Christ saves children too. In other words, children also need saving. In other words, children are not so pure and perfect as we imagine them to be, automatic heirs of heaven because they are so good and sweet. If that were true, then why would they need Christ? The difference between children and adults is that children are given a pass. But they need the pass! Understand?

The text then concludes with this explanation: all men, including children, were lost. And the reason all men, including children, are lost is because “of the transgression of their parents.” So we do get residual bad stuff from our ancestry. Sin is in the DNA.

That's very foreign to Mormon thinking but that's what this Mormon text says.

That's reverse nepotism, not blessed by our parents but cursed by our parents. In the pre-existence we choose to be born. Well, fine. Being born is a blessing. But we would have to accept the bad with the good, and surely that was explained to us.

But doesn't that contradict **Article of Faith 2** *We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression?* No, those two ideas do not contradict each other unless we force them to contradict each other. They contradict only if we insist that **Article of Faith 2** means that children do not inherit Adam and Eve's sin nature. But that article says no such thing. Indeed, we *do* inherit our nature from our parents, specifically our nature to sin, just as surely as a pit bull inherits its nature to kill from its parents.

Further, we inherited not only our parent's nature, a genetic nature to sin, but we also inherited the result of their fall:

2 Nephi 2:21 ... they were lost, because of the transgression of their parents.

They fell, and so we were lost.

But isn't that exactly what **Article of Faith 2** contradicts? No! *We were lost* does not mean that we *are* lost.

Isn't that hair splitting? No! We, and children, are rescued by Jesus Christ. That's the point of the text. We are indeed punished for our own sins if we don't repent and accept grace. But we are never punished for Adam's transgression. But that doesn't mean we don't receive a sin nature from Adam and Eve. How we deal with that sin nature is our choice. If we surrender ourselves to Christ, we escape the consequences of their fall. Children though escape the consequences without conditions, but not because they are so good but because they are judged innocent, and there's a difference.

***2 Nephi 9:21** And he cometh into the world that he may save all men if they will hearken unto his voice; for behold, he suffereth the pains of all men, yea, the pains of every living creature, both men, women, and children, who belong to the family of Adam.*

So that we don't falsely think that "Every living creature" somehow excludes "children," Nephi explicitly inserts "children" into his list of living creatures who need Christ. The umbrella we call atonement protects children, and we might wonder why. If children are so pure, so perfect, why do they need anything from Christ? The point is, they do. So we must be deficient in some way, all of us, from birth.

***Mosiah 3:16** And even if it were possible that little children could sin they could not be saved; but I say unto you that are blessed; for behold, as in Adam, or by nature, they fall, even so the blood of Christ atoneth for their sins.*

Let me paraphrase this awkwardly worded verse: If children can sin they can't be saved. Why? Because they cannot repent, (**Moroni 8:19**). So they'd be stuck. But, the verse goes on to say, they *do* fall and are *indeed* stuck. But not really because Christ atones for them unconditionally. Their escape from the inescapable is Christ.

Let's read this another way. King Benjamin is not saying, "children are helpless against sin therefore they are innocent." He is saying, "children are helpless against sin therefore they are *judged* innocent." Let's not remove Christ from the equation. Children are saved not because of their innate goodness, but because Christ granted his grace to them unconditionally which atones for their sins. That's what the text says.

***Mosiah 3:18** ...the infant perisheth not that dieth in his infancy... **:19** For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam and will be forever and ever, unless he ... becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things ... as a child doth submit to his father. **:21** ... none shall be found blameless before God, except it be little children, only through repentance and faith on the name of the Lord God Omnipotent.*

King Benjamin is basically saying three things: **[1]** Children who die are saved although he doesn't say why or how they are saved. **[2]** Human nature makes us enemies of God. **[3]** Children are sweet (submissive, meek, etc.) and we need to be like that to be saved. But although **:19** says children are "found" blameless, these verses nowhere say

why they are found blameless. We can infer that they are found blameless because they are helpless to make moral decisions.

Alma 34:9 ...Christ shall come among the children of men, to take upon him the transgression of his people, and that he shall atone for the sins of the world...

This verse is not so strongly worded, but I included it to note that the “sins of the world” is pretty encompassing.

Ether 3:2 ...because of the fall our natures have become evil continually...

There are two points here:

[1] Sin is in our nature and not merely the result of our accountable choices. Since it is in our nature, how can we believe that it is not in the nature of children? Can we believe that our nature suddenly changed on our eighth birthday? Clearly that’s nonsense. What changed on our eighth birthday was accountability, not human nature.

[2] This verse tracks this evil nature back to the fall of Adam. In other words, it’s a family trait. Let’s review *Article of Faith 2*. True, we are not punished for something Adam did, we are punished only for what we do. But our nature to do evil came from Adam and Eve. Imagine that you are dying from cancer because of a cancer gene you inherited from your father. You are dying from *your* cancer, not from *his* cancer. But still you inherited the gene from him even though the cancer that kills you is your own. Sin is like that. You inherited that nature. But your decision to sin is your own, and that is what kills you, not what you inherited but what you do with what you inherit. Unfair? Yes it is. But that’s the deal. Fortunately for us, God recognized the unfairness of original sin and responded by sending his son to pay for it. Original sin is unfair. But that doesn’t mean there isn’t such a thing. It does mean that God took care of it which is more than fair.

Moroni 8:12 But little children are alive in Christ, even from the foundation of the world; if not so, God is a partial God, and also a changeable God, and a respecter to persons; for how many little children have died without baptism! :19 Little children cannot repent; wherefore, it is awful wickedness to deny the pure mercies of God unto them, for they are all alive in him because of his mercy.

This verse makes my point exactly. Children are alive *in Christ*. But why? Because they are naturally good and sinless? No. Because Christ grants to them the “pure mercies of God.” They are alive “because of his mercy.” If they were pure and sinless, why would they need mercy? The point is they are not pure and sinless, and they need to repent like anyone else. But “little children cannot repent,” therefore God gives them grace without condition.

D&C 29:46 But behold, I say unto you, that little children are redeemed from the foundation of the world through mine Only Begotten; :47 Wherefore, they cannot sin, for the power is not given unto Satan to tempt little children, until they begin to become accountable before me.

Indeed, children cannot sin. But what exactly does that mean? There are several Hebrew and Greek words that we translate to sin. Most of them mean to “err” and some of them mean to “miss the mark.” In either case, God expects you to do something, but instead, you do something else. That’s what sin is.

If your four year old is tossing bean bags at a hole in a board and misses the hole, you don’t say “you missed,” you say, “good, you hit the board.” Basically, you, a loving parent, change the rules as needed, or eliminate them, preferring instead to encourage your child. The rules are whatever you want them to be, or no rules at all. For children, God has no rules, (well, fluid rules — he and we do expect them to learn.). So any temptation that Satan tosses at them is meaningless in God’s rulebook. In that sense, children cannot sin, cannot miss because God moves the target to where they are aiming.

That does not mean they hit the target, it means it doesn’t matter if they hit the target or not. That doesn’t mean that they don’t have a sin nature — other verses insist they do and they will eventually have to come to grips with that sin nature as they become accountable. But in the meantime, as the verse says, they are “redeemed.”

What does redeemed mean? It means “bought back.” Well, you can’t be bought back if you weren’t sold in the first place. Like a hocked guitar that you have to buy back, Jesus bought back redeemed children. Therefore, to say that Children cannot sin means they cannot miss because God changes the rules, not because they are such good shots.

D&C 74:6 ...that the tradition might be done away, which saith that little children are unholy... :7 But little children are holy, being sanctified through the atonement of Jesus Christ.

No other verse says it so clearly as this. Children are holy. But why? How? Because they are just naturally good? That’s not what it says. They are holy because they are made holy (i.e., sanctified) by the atonement. That’s what the word “sanctified” means. The Greek word agios (αγιός) means “apart” and we translate it to the English words sanctify and holy. How did children get holy? Jesus sanctified them. We should give children less credit and give Jesus more credit.

D&C 93:38 Every spirit of man was innocent in the beginning; and God having redeemed man from the fall, man became again, in their infant state, innocent before God.

Now think this through with me, and allow the verse to mean what it says. We were innocent in the preexistence. But at birth, as infants, we had to become innocent *again*. How in the world does that happen? The only way to make any sense of it is that in between, as we came to this world, we encountered guilt from the fall, and God had to protect us from it. And he did protect us from it, with the redemption. Let’s give God the credit for our original “innocence” and not take credit to ourselves because as babies we were so cute.

And that brings us full circle back to —

Moses 6:54 Hence came the saying abroad among the people, that the Son of God hath atoned for original guilt. Wherein the sins of the parents cannot be answered upon the heads of the children. :55 And the Lord spake unto Adam, saying: Inasmuch as thy children are conceived in sin, even so when they begin to grow up, sin conceiveth in their hearts, and they taste the bitter, that they may know to prize the good.

There *is* original guilt. If not, how could Jesus atone for it? Why would he? We *are* conceived in sin. If not, then where does the sin come from that we have to deal with throughout our lives from adolescence on? And finally, there is this; a Bible verse —

Psalms 58:3 The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies.

Sin begins *from the womb*. Don't like that? Well then, dismiss it as incorrect translation if you wish. Honestly, I don't care what you do with this verse, or any verse. I am not trying to convince you of anything. I am, I suppose, nudging you to pay more attention to the strict details of what the scriptures actually say as opposed to what you think they say because that's what everyone else says they say.

But understand this much: I am not telling you what to believe, I am just telling you what the scriptures say. Now you believe what you want.